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AUTHOR Mueller, Marsha R.; Krueger, Richard A.
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ABSTRACT

Two evaluation projects conducted for the Minnesota Agricultural Extension Service are examined from a user-focused perspective: (1) a needs assessment of large scale commercial farmers for program development by the Office of Special Programs; and (2) a review of the extension programs in Nicollet County. Each incorporated the focus group method as part of the project design. The studies are different in scope, design and the extent to which user-focused evaluation principles were considered. The first study used focus group interviews following a large scale quantitative survey in a county region of the state. The second study was designed to look at one county and the focus group procedure was the major information gathering technique. The "Personal Factor" continues to appear to be a most critical factor in utilization. When stakeholders need and want information for a specific purpose, the chances of future use are greatly enhanced. Limited county level studies may tend to result in greater immediate utilization than do the state wide or regional studies due to the more situationally specific nature and the fact that a particular environment is targeted. Investments of time and resources tend to correlate with utilization. The use of qualitative procedures appears to depend on situational factors. (PN)

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Qualitative Evaluation from a Utilization Focused Perspective, The Minnesota Experience

by

Marsha R. Mueller
Extension Specialist Program Development
University of Minnesota
and
Richard A. Krueger
Extension Specialist Program Evaluation
University of Minnesota

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Introduction

Use of qualitative evaluation methods is growing in Minnesota. During the past year there has been particular interest in the use of the focus group technique to gain information about Extension programs and learners. As more interest is generated in qualitative methods it is of value to look at completed projects to see what we can learn about the processes, designs, and uses of evaluations. These insights will enable us to be better consumers and counselors of program evaluation.

The purpose of this paper is to take a thoughtful look, from a user-focused perspective, at two projects conducted in Minnesota. Each incorporated the focus group method as part of the project design. The first area to be addressed concerns the projects' experiences and processes. Were the efforts indeed user focused? The second question explores the utilization of project information following the completion of the evaluation-- the who, what, where, when, how, and why questions of practical use. Finally we will take a closer look at the focus group method. What particular problems and opportunities seem to be associated with the use of the focus group method in the context of its use in these two projects?

Assumptions and Definitions

The questions of this paper include several concepts which require some explanation. The following paragraphs provide a brief review of three major ideas: (1) User-focused evaluation; (2) Utilization; and (3) Focus Group Interviews.

User-Focused Evaluation. User-focused evaluation, as described by Patton, is an "orientation" or an "approach" to a set of options. This approach has two requirements. First, the decision makers and information users must be identified and organized and second, the evaluators must work with the stakeholders to make other study decisions. Five major considerations characterize this type of evaluation:

(1) Identification and organization of relevant decision makers and information users;
(2) The relevant evaluation questions are identified and focused;
(3) Evaluation methods are selected that generate useful information for identified and organized decision makers and information users;
(4) Decision makers and information users participate with evaluators in data analysis and data interpretation; and
(5) Evaluators and decision makers negotiate and cooperate in dissemination efforts. [1]

Utilization. The Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation identified 30 separate evaluation standards organized into four groups. The standards concern the utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy of any evaluation. The idea of utility, the first category, is "...to ensure that evaluators acquaint themselves with their audiences, ascertain their information needs, plan evaluations to respond to these needs, and report the relevant information clearly and when it is needed." [2]

Utilization has multiple definitions, as does the word evaluation. Patton has noted that "since there is no universally accepted definition of evaluation, there can be no universally accepted definition of utilization."[3] He goes further to explain that the definition of utility will be derived from a prior definition of evaluation. Utility is situation specific, planned for, and defined within the context of a particular project.

To develop an understanding of the concept of utility as it becomes a characteristic of an evaluation, a series of questions are addressed. The manner in which those questions are answered define the criteria of utility within any particular evaluation setting. The criteria also provide evidence of the utility of a particular evaluation effort. Important to consider are the following:

(1) What is used? Is it determined that the evaluation has affected thinking about an idea, a program, an activity, a product (i.e., conceptual impact) or can observable changes be identified (i.e., action impact.)? Are the evaluation reports, processes, or evaluators used?

(2) Who uses the evaluation? The stakeholders in any evaluation may be many or few. Is it used by clients, administrators, program staff, or evaluators?

(3) When is the evaluation used? Is the use of the evaluation project immediate, can short run application be observed, or are the impacts incremental results revealing themselves in glimpses over a period of time?

(4) How is it used? Is the use of the evaluation planned or unplanned, formal or informal?

(5) Where is the evaluation used? Is the information used at a local, state or national level?

(6) Why was the evaluation used? Is the ultimate utility of the evaluation due to design factors, contextual characteristics or personal factors?[4]

Focus Group Interviews The focus group interview is a qualitative research technique which has had widespread use in market research. The technique consists of a series of group interviews on a focused topic. The group environment allows participants to discuss the topic at hand in a non-threatening natural manner. Focus group interviews are well suited to obtain information about experiences, feelings, or perceptions. The purpose is to uncover a range of explanations about common experiences held by members of the group. The interviewer or moderator uses a question outline and unstructured questions to pursue the topic of interest. At first glance the methodology appears to be similar to traditional Extension group procedures, such as the normative group process or the Delphi approach. It is decidedly different from these experiences in that the participants do not plan, vote, or reach a consensus on issues. Typically the interviewees do not even know who is sponsoring the sessions. Emphasis is not on agreement, cooperation, or support, but on identifying the range of observations, attitudes, and opinions and then uncovering why these perceptions are held.

Case Examples

The following examples are descriptions of two evaluation studies conducted in Minnesota during the past year. Both incorporated the focus group interview as part of the evaluation design. The studies are different in scope, design and the extent to which user-focused evaluation principles were considered. The first study used focus group interviews following a large scale quantitative survey in a county region of the state. The second study was designed to look at one county and the focus group procedure was the major information gathering technique.

Case #1 - A Needs Assessment Study in Northwestern Minnesota

The Office of Special Programs (OSP) is a support unit of the Minnesota Agricultural Extension Service. The main function of the unit is to work with specialists and agents to develop short term workshops and conferences. The unit specializes in fee based, multi-county educational programs. In November 1983, staff specialists with OSP began considering programs aimed at the larger scale farmer, an audience that has received limited attention from county extension programs. Consideration was given to identifying the problems encountered by the large scale commercial farmers, where they obtain answers to problems, and their preferred learning environments.

What could extension provide these large scale commercial operators? In order to answer this question two program development specialists from the Office of Special Programs provided leadership for the needs assessment process. During the winter of 83-84 a survey instrument was pilot tested with the state agricultural advisory committee, finalized by the end of March, funded in April, and mailed out in May. A second quantitative instrument was developed in May following consultation with 35 subject matter specialists, pilot tested, and implemented in July. The data analysis and report was completed by September. Following an analysis of this quantitative data, the evaluator concluded that a series of focus

group interviews should be held with survey participants to illuminate the findings of the mail out survey. As a result, three focus group interviews were planned for November, 1984.

Prior to the interviews, the two evaluators invited five specialists to a planning meeting to review the findings of the needs assessment survey and to solicit their ideas and commitment to an intensive seminar for large scale commercial producers. The specialists were also asked for suggestions on what questions should be included in the focus group sessions. The specialists showed restrained interest in the idea and had time limitations that restricted their involvement. They suggested that the focus group questioning address more detailed information about the farmers' understanding of the problems identified in the mail out survey.

The group interviews were conducted the week following Thanksgiving. Three sessions were conducted with 27 participants. The interviews verified the findings of the mail out survey and provided additional insights as to learning preferences of these commercial operators.

Late in December, 1984, the evaluators once again met with the specialist group and reviewed the findings of the focus group interviews. A proposed seminar format was discussed and it was recommended that additional funds would need to be found in order to carry out the ideal format. In January, the evaluators met with the Director of Extension to review the project and its conclusions. Formal planning temporarily ceased at this point due to time constraints and limited resources.

During the first half of 1985, although formal work responding to the report had not been initiated, there were reports of independent activities in counties which supported the study findings. Opportunities also became available to disseminate the evaluation findings. In February, 1985, county agents in the Northwest district held a two day seminar for farmers focusing on the topics identified in the survey. Even though the registration fee was over $200.00, there were 250 farmers in attendance. In March, the evaluators were asked to give a presentation on the study to the state agricultural advisory committee. In May, the reports were

included in a packet of information handed out at a retreat of all specialists and agents involved in the agricultural program area. One county agent talked with the evaluator at, the retreat, about how they needed an advanced marketing seminar in the area and thought it would be a good idea to develop something. In late June, two studies by county agents were brought to the attention of the evaluator. Both had used portions of the survey design in local projects.

During the summer of 1985, direct requests for planning assistance were received from agents in the Northwest district. A group of Northwest agents asked evaluators for assistance in planning a long range project in their part of the state. In August the evaluators were invited to participate in a planning meeting in the district. An intensive two day seminar is planned for January 1986.

Case #2 - A County Program Review

Nicollet County is in transition. The county is located in south central Minnesota. It contains quality farm land in the central and western parts of the county and a growing urban population in the eastern side of the county. The county population, as a whole, is younger than the rest of the state. It has more single people, a higher educational level, and a high economic base. The majority of the residents (68%) live in the eastern urban areas of the county. The county extension staff of 3 professionals have all joined the staff within the past four years.

The request for a county program review originated with the extension staff and extension committee. This advisory committee concurred with the staff that a review of county extension programs would be beneficial. A program review committee, which was a sub-committee of the extension committee, was established to explore means of conducting a non-traditional review of extension operations and programs. The extension specialist in program evaluation was consulted and asked to provide several options for

conducting a county review; focus group interviews being one of the choices. The program review committee identified the focus group method as the preferred choice.

In order to ensure careful adherence to appropriate focus group procedures, the evaluation specialist recommended working with a Twin Cities market research firm that specializes in focus group interviewing. A contract was established with Rockwood Research to provide logistical support, training for the volunteer moderators, and assistance in analysis of the findings. The $4000 cost of the focus group interview process was shared jointly by the Minnesota Agricultural Extension Service (62%) and Nicollet County (38%).

Six members of the Program Review Committee volunteered to serve as moderators and take 12 hours of special training followed by another 12 hours needed to conduct the focus groups sessions. It was a team effort with major leadership provided by a county extension agent. The other two extension agents invested major amounts of time in planning, identifying focus group questions, attending training sessions and in general providing assistance to the effort. Part time workers were used for telephone screening to secure participants for the focus group sessions. The extension specialist in evaluation provided advice and counsel to the extension staff and program review committee, and also served as the liaison with Rockwood Research.

A total of ten focus groups were conducted in various locations in the county, consisting of the following categories of residents: community and business leaders, parents of young children, farmers under age 50, parents with teens, and women from dual-income families. Extension staff, in cooperation with Rockwood Research and the evalution specialist, formulated the questions for the group interviews. Analysis was conducted by the extension specialist with cooperation and verification by the Rockwood Research staff. The final report was presented to the Nicollet County Commissioners by the president of Rockwood Research in April, 1985.

The report of the focus groups met with positive acceptance from members of the county extension committee, county commissioners, and the program review committee. Following the report, the extension staff developed a plan of action based on the report which outlined specific action steps needed. This was reviewed and approved by the county extension committee. These plans consisted of: special efforts to increase the visibility of the county extension service, including expanding Extension News, a county extension newsletter on horticulture, home economics and youth to all urban areas of the county; development of a total media effort; and other strategies to market the local extension program. Within the agricultural program area plans were made to develop a quarterly agriculture newsletter for county farmers; organization of an agricultural council and additional support for the master gardener program. In community development plans include adapting the computer program FINPACK to small businesses and also cooperative efforts with the local revitalization task force. In home economics additional educational opportunities have been extended to working women, organization of a network of home economists in the county, and expanded educational efforts with food shelf and commodity programs. In the youth program area plans are underway to offer special interest programs in dog obedience and fishing.

The Questions

Were the evaluation projects user focused? It is evident from the case description of the county study that the impetus for the evaluation emerged directly from local staff and volunteers who needed and wanted the information. The stakeholders were closely involved in all aspects of the project design, interpretation of the findings and use of the project results. The county study is an ideal example of stakeholders knowing the kind of information they wanted and what to do with the findings. All five criteria of a user-focused evaluation were considered in the county evaluation.

The Northwest project began as a study designed to answer specific questions for a specific group of people, the OSP staff. The design had the benefit of triangulated evidence resulting from a quantitative study coupled with focus group results. The regional study is also an example of an evolving project and the ambiguity which can follow. At the beginning of the project the questions were general and focused at potential OSP operations. The initial stakeholders were appropriate to the situation and closely involved in project decisions. As the project progressed the study "waters" became deeper, the questions more specific and the scope broader. The initial stakeholder group was mismatched. To implement the findings other stakeholders were needed, such as specific county agents, specialists, and clientel.

Were the evaluations used? From the description of the county study it is possible to identify actual plans and programs which have been developed as a direct result of the study findings. As reported, these plans and programs have been designed and used by program staff and clients. Some of the projects developed from study data have been completed and others are in progress. The use of project information was immediate. The high level of stakeholder involvement, committment, and interest in the project guaranteed a high degree of utilization.

The use of information from the Northwest project is uncertain. An action impact has not been observed. However, evidence of conceptual impacts are reported. The evaluators have changed their conceptions of potential programs. County agents, specialists and administrators, after exposure to study findings, are beginning to request programs similar to those recommended in the study. From the case description we know that the evaluation has been used by OSP staff. It is unclear whether others within the organization have directly used the evaluation although it is reported that others have read the study and that some discussion of the findings has occurred. The lack of immediate action impacts may be due to the failure of the evaluators to involve appropriate stakeholders as the project evolved.

The regional study demonstrated a systematic program planning process which incorporated a carefully designed needs assessment process. The specialists and administrator who were involved in the regional study have had first hand exposure to the process of planning and needs assessment. These process skills may be of substantial value in future planning efforts.

Was the focus group method appropriate? For both studies, the focus group method appears to have been an excellent evaluation procedure given the time and financial resources available to the projects. The method did what was expected. It had the added advantage, in the county study, of directly involving stakeholders in data collection, thus continuing to emphasize their involvement in the project.

Conclusions

The "Personal Factor" continues to appear to be a most critical factor in utilization. When stakeholders need and want information for a specific purpose, the chances of future use are greatly enhanced. In the county study the stakeholders made a specific decision to use the focus group procedures, and were required to allocate human and financial resources to conduct the study. In contrast the regional study never found a "champion" with sufficient human and financial resources to implement the findings.

Limited county level studies may tend to result in greater immediate utilization than do the state wide or regional studies. Local studies tend to be more situationally specific and targeted to a particular environment, whereas regional and state level studies are more diffused. In addition, stakeholders are more supportive for locally based endeavors than regional or state level projects.

Investments of time and resources tend to correlate with utilization. When decision makers allocate time and resources for a study project, they are more likely to actually apply the findings. In the county project

the local government needed to allocate special resources and argue for those monies at budget hearings. In addition the local volunteers needed to invest at least 20 hours of their time to the project. By contrast the regional project was conducted by professional staff with inloaded Extension resources. Resources were required for the regional study, but were scraped together from other Extension projects. The regional study never appeared as a budget item, nor did it ever require volunteer time.

An examination of the Northwest study surfaces an interesting problem for evaluators seeking useful projects and designs. If, as a project unfolds the questions change, other aspects of the design seem to require change also. "Relevant" stakeholders chosen at the onset of a study may cease to serve their function. The utilization of evaluation results may then be determined by the evaluators sensitivity to the developing circumstance, his ability to interpret organizational constraints and opportunities.

Qualitative procedures are no guarantee of utilization. In this respect it is our observation that qualitative evaluations are similar to their quantitative cousins, and whether or not they are used depends on situational factors.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Michael Quin Patton, Utilization-Focused Evaluation, (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1978), pp. 284-289.

[2] Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, Standards for Evaluations of Educational Programs, Projects and Materials (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981).

[3] Michael Quinn Patton, "Extension Research Needs in Evaluation". (Paper presented at the Symposium on Extension Research Needs, Ohio State University, May 22, 1985), p. 7.

[4] Ibid., pp. 8-16.

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